

<BOOK REVIEWS>Black Wave: How Networks and Governance Shaped Japan ' s 3/11 Disasters By Daniel P. Aldrich

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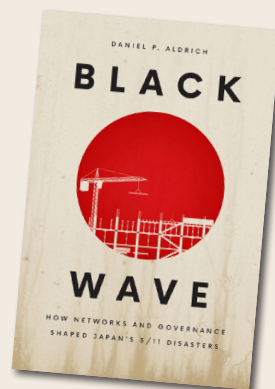
## BOOK REVIEW

### ***Black Wave: How Networks and Governance Shaped Japan's 3/11 Disasters***

By Daniel P. Aldrich

University of Chicago Press, 2019  
xviii + 270 pages.

Reviewed by Wesley CHEEK



Daniel Aldrich's *Black Wave* is a robust account of the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami. This is no small feat as the triple disaster of 11 March 2011 was a calamity on a scale that is difficult to imagine. Not only did this disaster cause over \$360 billion in damage across hundreds of miles of coastline and inland areas, it also spurred multiple nuclear meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The problem facing any scholar approaching this particular disaster is in choosing which aspect to address. Any facet of 3/11—the social production of risk, the initial response, the ongoing recovery efforts, and the continuing nuclear crisis—is a large task for any one book. Aldrich's approach to the sheer scale of the issue is to understand the complexities through the lens of social capital. This approach should be familiar to anyone who has read Aldrich's previous work.

Social capital, as advanced by scholars such as Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam, can be thought of as a measurable form of solidarity or an aggregation of potential resources. It can be understood as a method through which the intangible bindings of society are made tangible. By expounding on the idea of social capital—as expressed through both statistical analysis as well as qualitative exposition—Aldrich complicates the idea of 3/11 as an event that is easily separable into discrete components. He makes the argument that a complex of connections beyond hierarchical structures is necessary for recovery from this disaster, as well as for the mitigation of future catastrophes.

In this book, social capital is posited as residing in two main networks: local and governmental. Aldrich layers his analysis at the international, national, regional, local, and personal levels. This is an effective means by which to make the enormity of the disaster more approachable. It also assists in understanding the levels at which Japanese government functions. The main contention in *Black Wave* is one Aldrich has expounded upon throughout his career: better government and stronger local networks result in better responses to the onset of a disaster and in stronger recoveries afterwards. The existence and maintenance of *bonding*, *bridging*, and *linking* social capital are the critical components of the successful management of a disaster. In examining the idea of social capital using statistical methods, however, one runs the risk of deemphasizing human narratives. This is especially true of a moment as visceral as a disaster. Aldrich addresses this by including interviews and examples that illustrate his

statistical findings. We hear the story of a baker sunk deep in loans in the devastation of Rikuzentakata who has returned to the town despite little prospect of thriving commerce. He has done so out of a personal feeling of commitment to the area (pp. 57–58). We are also introduced to a favored local son with big-time national and international connections who is able to wheel and deal for the benefit of recovery in his community (p. 95). These stories serve as expositions of what social capital means, and how it functions. Statistical methods are also used to illuminate what might otherwise seem counterintuitive. For example, we learn that the height of a seawall does not have any notable effect on mortality during the tsunami. Aldrich turns up no evidence that residents of communities with shorter seawalls, or no seawalls at all, perished at any higher rate than their better protected neighbors. What did matter, it turns out, was the insistence of neighbors that evacuation was critical. This type of ad-hoc evacuation was facilitated by having preexisting relationships with those neighbors (p. 81). In this way, statistical analysis can point us in directions that deserve further study.

If I were to take any issues with *Black Wave*, they would be ones that have been raised about other works on social capital. Given that there is ample conflict taking place in this book, how can there be so little conflict theory? This is an issue that Bourdieu, a harsh critic of neoliberalism, struggled with as well. Throughout the disaster environment there is a vibrating line of tension between those who have power and those who do not. What are the origins of this power? How is it maintained? Are we seeing any opportunities to subvert the power structure itself? What do we make of good government and community ties when effective government can be used to suppress a community? These are questions I found myself asking while reading *Black Wave*. However, Aldrich has taken on a large enough project for one book. These questions can be addressed by other scholars in future works.

*Black Wave* is a useful resource for those who know very little about the events of 3.11 and are looking for a broad introduction. It is also beneficial for those who are already knowledgeable about the disaster but would like to delve deeper into the complex factors involved in the response and recovery. This book is approachable for an undergraduate course while at the same time carrying enough scholarly weight for use in graduate seminars. I would recommend *Black Wave* to those who are teaching disaster management, sociology of disasters, or a sociology course that explores the idea of social capital. In addition, the events of 3.11 have inspired fundamental changes to facets of Japanese government, and so this book is also of value to scholars of Japan in general.